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The Complexities of *Narcoviolencia:* Understanding the Mexican Drug Conflict as a Market of Violence

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Abstract

This article examines the categorisation and definition of the drug-linked violence which has affected Mexico since 2006. Academic and policy approaches to this conflict have largely been grouped into defining the violence as either an incidence of irregular warfare, or as a particularly virulent strain of organized crime. Arguing that these models both obscure important aspects of the situation in Mexico, and that even the applications of network theory to conflict do not account for the resilience and scope of the conflict in Mexico. Instead, this article suggests the idea of a "market of violence" defined by a large number of groups competing for resources and bordered by a series of external constraints is the most accurate framework for assessing the conflict. Having presented this idea, the article concludes by assessing how changes in the constraints of this market could undercut the rationale for drug-linked violence in Mexico.

Introduction

Since 2006, Mexico has been gripped by violence related to the trade in illegal drugs, thanks to its position between the drug producers of Central and South America and the world's largest recreational narcotics market, the United States of America. While it is impossible to accurately count the victims of this conflict, reports indicate that the death toll so far is approaching 50,000 (Fantz 2012). The overall scale of the violence is matched by its complexity—there are, as of this writing, at least seven major drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) involved, along with countless smaller ones[1] – and its brutality. But, strikingly, this is a conflict defined as much by what it lacks as by what it includes, and what it lacks is a clear political agenda on the part of almost all of the combatants. The absence of such an agenda increases the difficulty of understanding the conflict through the traditional tools of strategic or political analysis, such as theories of insurgency and counterinsurgency;[2] but at the same time, the scale of the violence makes it difficult to understand through analytical tools designed for smaller-scale incidences of crime or violence, such as those provided by criminology. The difficulties in understanding the conflict mirror, in some ways, the difficulties that the Mexican and American governments have encountered in formulating policies that can effectively manage it—the militarised strategy pursued by the Calderón administration (and more or less supported by the Bush and Obama administrations on the American side) has not led to a decrease either in violence or in the availability of drugs in the United States, but at the same time the level of violence in certain parts of Mexico is too great for traditional policing strategies to be employed.

More contemporarily, some writers (Sullivan 2001; Arquilla & Ronfeldt 2001) have applied network theory to

1 Although for obvious reasons it is impossible to accurately rank the power of the various cartels relative to each other, it is generally accepted that the most powerful trafficking organizations as of this writing are the Gulf Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel (aka La Linea), the Juarez Cartel, La Familia Michoacana, Los Zetas, the Beltran Leyva Organization and the Arellano Felix Organization (Fantz, 2012).

2 Contemporary thinking on counterinsurgency is probably best summed up by the US Army and Marine Corps joint Field Manual on Counterinsurgency, FM 3-24.

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irregular conflicts. While helpful in understanding that the structures of individual drug trafficking organizations are not necessarily hierarchical, making them more resistant to disruption by the arrest or killing of their leadership, these theories have generally been applied to groups which share a purpose. The situation in Mexico is more complex, involving a large number of separate groups whose relationships with each other are highly fluid and range from full cooperation to extremely violent competition, with profit as the only apparent common interest between them.

Given those difficulties, there is a clear need to explore alternative means of understanding this conflict. This article proposes one such approach: viewing the conflict as an example of a "market of violence" which exists within a specific set of constraints imposed partly by the particular geographical, political and economic situation in Mexico and partly by the structure of the international narcotics control system and the dynamics of globalisation as applied to a completely illegitimate market. A market of violence is a conflict driven by its economic origins; actors within the market are not bound by common interest beyond their shared desire for profit, whose character is further defined not by the individual strategy or tactics of any individual participant, but by a set of external constraints beyond their power to alter. It is a flexible framework which accounts for the co-existence of complex interactions between a wide variety of violent actors. Viewing violence in Mexico in this fashion also changes its comparative set: instead of approaching it as a type of warfare abetted by profits from the sale of narcotics, as in Colombia or Peru in the 1980s, the market model argues that the contemporary situation in Mexico is more comparable to Russia following the fall of Communism or Sicily in the heyday of the Mafia.

This article illustrates how this conflict has been perpetuated by a system of constraints and interests have given rise to a persistent conflict, rather than the particular strategy or interest of any one organization or group. In other words, instead of analysing how individual DTOs are organized, this article posits that the overall structure of global drug trafficking and the Mexican state have created a persistent marketplace for drugs and drug-trafficking services in which the chief regulating factor is the provision of violence.

The first section briefly outlines the history of the current drug conflict in Mexico, starting with Mexico's emergence as a major drug transit state in the 1970s and 80s, when the state and its drug traffickers coexisted relatively peacefully, through the end of PRI rule in 2000 and the beginning of the current drug conflict at the beginning of President Felipe Calderón's term in 2006. It briefly describes the different tactics employed by some of the more prominent drug trafficking groups and examines the role of the United States, both directly and indirectly, in the conflict.

The second section briefly examines the constraints which define the conflict, divided roughly into two sections, external and internal constraints. The external constraints comprise the structure of the globalised drug trafficking system, including the effects of the prohibition system and the bifurcation between wealthy drug-consumption states and poor, fragile drug-production states. The internal constraints in Mexico include the weaknesses of its law enforcement agencies, security services, and judiciary, and its geographic advantages as a transit state for the world's largest consumer of narcotics, the United States.

The third section outlines the nature of a marketplace of violence as it exists in Mexico. Starting with the limitations of "netwar" and similar applications of network theory to explain complex conflicts, it demonstrates how given favourable local conditions, an appropriate resource, and a global system which links economies without providing equality of opportunity can create a marketplace regulated by apparently extreme violence can persist, even with high turnover amongst participants.

The final section of the article proposes four ways in which the conditions of the marketplace could change, leading to a return to lower, pre-2006 levels of violence. It considers the extremely unlikely eventualities of a complete paradigm shift in the border economy, either by means of shutting or fortifying the border or by legalising drugs; as well as the relatively unlikely possibility of a resumption of the pre-2000 cooperative truce between drug traffickers and the Mexican state. Finally, it considers the longer-term but more feasible alternatives: a cultural shift against trafficking violence which limits the courses of action available to drug traffickers, or a massive program of institution-building to enable the Mexican state to raise the penalties for violence to a point where it is no longer the best regulator of this market. While these are imperfect solutions which will be slow to implement and are better-suited for managing the violence rather than permanently defeating all current or possible drug trafficking organizations, they are the best approaches to a conflict which has been persistently mischaracterised and misunderstood.

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A Conflict without a Name: Drug War in Mexico, 2006-Present

There is little agreement on the nature of violence in Mexico; but even more fundamentally, no one seems to agree on how to call it. The general term in areas affected is simply narcoviolencia, or drug violence (Vuillamy 2010), but that term is too general to be of much use either analytically or prescriptively. The Mexican government seems to prefer to call it a "fight" or "battle" against organized crime (Poiré 2011); the US Secretary of State at one point called it an "insurgency" but had to withdraw her comments in the face of Mexican anger (Carroll 2010); and of course, the United States has used the overarching metaphor of a "war against drugs" since 1971.[3] Yet none of these seem to adequately encompass the dimensions of the conflict. Using politically-charged words like "war" and "insurgency" implies that the cartels have political goals, like Mexican versions of the Taliban or the Viet Cong. But while there are a few limited exceptions, they simply do not have political or ideological motives in the way that classical insurgencies do (Finnegan 2010).[4] At the same time, depoliticising the violence and arguing that the various non-state participants are simply gangs engaged in violent criminal activities underplays their level of sophistication and ability to challenge the state's monopoly on force in the largest and richest Spanish-speaking country in the world. I use the term "conflict" to describe the violence in question, since it is relatively neutral with respect to the political and ideological content of the violence.

What is relatively uncontested is that the current incarnation of the violence dates roughly to the election of current president Felipe Calderón in late 2006. Its roots, however, go back farther than that. Mexico has long been a "trading partner" of sorts for illicit goods bound for the United States, and the endemic corruption under the Partido de Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which ruled the country from 1930 until 2000 allowed this to continue largely unchecked. Under the PRI, the drug cartels formed what has been described as a "state-sponsored protection racket", whereby corruption at high levels in the Mexican security and justice apparatus allowed drug traffickers to go about their business relatively unmolested (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009: 253-273). Another way of conceptualising this arrangement is that the PRI and the cartels made an informal agreement: the cartels would be free to do their business so long as they kept a limit on the amount of violence they perpetrated (Andreas 1998: 163).

This persisted until roughly the 1980s, when the dynamics of the trafficking business began to change. Although it produces a moderate amount of heroin and marijuana, Mexico has never been a world-class drug supplier in the vein of Colombia or Afghanistan (UNODC 2011). However, during the "cocaine cowboys" era of the 1980s, when Colombian and Cuban trafficking groups were the primary actors bringing marijuana and cocaine to market in the United States—and frequently fighting violent turf battles around Miami and South Florida—the American government stepped up interdiction efforts in the Caribbean, which cut deeply into the profit margins of groups which relied on that route. Seeking more direct access to the US market, the Colombian cartels approached Mexican smugglers and offered them a cut of the profits to move their goods into the United States across the land border. This border, 1969 miles long and largely marked by inhospitable deserts and mountains, is extremely difficult to patrol or secure effectively. With a steady supply of drugs from the south and a seizure rate going north insufficient to negatively affect the traffickers' profit margin,[5] the Mexican cartels racked up massive profits and quickly grew (Feiling 2009: 134-137).

However, when the PRI lost the 2000 presidential elections, its fragile peace with the drug traffickers fell apart. The new government, headed by the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)'s Vicente Fox, decentralised and began to reform the PRI's justice system, which disrupted many of the relationships the cartels had built up over the preceding decades and deprived them of their state support (Snyder & Duran-Martinez 2009: 267). This process was accelerated following the 2006 elections, which the PAN's Felipe Calderón won under controversial circumstances by a mere fraction of a

3 Although this terminology was quietly withdrawn by the Obama Administration in 2009, the rhetorical shift was not accompanied by any significant change in counter-narcotics policy from its predecessors.

4 The primary exception being La Familia Michoacana (LFM), which claims a pseudo-Christian ideology and operates public services in its home state of Michoacan, in the traditional model of an insurgency. However, LFM has been substantially weakened by its rivals and by raids on its leadership by the Mexican government, and its future is highly uncertain.

5 The 2011 National Drug Threat Assessment indicated that while disruptions in the cocaine market (some from law enforcement interdiction efforts, some from infighting and other effects) had kept cocaine availability levels below 2007 levels, but that overall, availability of illicit drugs has been increasing in the United States.

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percentage point (McKinley 2006). Calderón ordered a show of force: the deployment of units of the Mexican Army and detachments from the Policia Federale[6] to his home state of Michoacan to confront drug trafficking activity there.[7] Shortly thereafter, his administration widened the deployment, sending troops to the country's border with the United States, which is the focal point of the smuggling. Over the first few months of this strategy, the government could point to some major seizures of narcotics and arrests of mid- and high-level traffickers as signs that the strategy was successful. However, by mid-2007, the murder rate was on the rise again and cartels were adopting new and more violent tactics (Killebrew & Bernal-Garcia 2010). To deal with the changing security situation, the Cartel del Golfo (the Gulf Cartel, or CdG, based on Mexico's eastern coast, which had been one of the largest and wealthiest cartels prior to 2006), encouraged members of the Mexican Army's special forces to desert, and formed them into an "armed wing" which came to be known as Los Zetas (Campbell 2011: 56). The Zetas, however, soon realised that their potential profits were limited by being subordinates in a larger organization, and subsequently declared independence from the CdG.

The total number of deaths related to the drug trade steadily increased from 2006, with 2221 that year increasing to 2561 in 2007, and a figure somewhere between 5620 and 6756 in 2008 (Williams 2009: 3). The approximate doubling of fatalities between 2007 and 2008 was troubling enough on its own, but it was accompanied by evidence that this was not simply a temporary surge of violence. Instead of avoiding conflict with the Mexican armed forces—which are, in contrast to the state and local police forces, generally professional, capable and well-equipped—the narcotraficantes were fighting back, assassinating leading political and law-enforcement figures (Williams 2009: 2) and using increasingly powerful military hardware (including modern body armour, encrypted communications gear, armoured vehicles, explosives and military-style assault and sniper rifles) to fight it out with security forces, and with each other (Ellingwood & Wilkinson 2011). In response, the United States began to take a more active role in the conflict. In 2009, the United States and Mexico signed a foreign aid agreement called the Mérida Initiative, under which the United States promised USD 1.4 billion in security assistance.[8] This plan was largely based on the American assistance package for Colombia agreed to under President Bill Clinton and largely put into effect under the Bush Administration (Brands 2009: 33). The older assistance package, called Plan Colombia, has been credited with giving the Colombian military the necessary means to drive the FARC and ELN rebels into the southern jungles and securing the country's major urban areas—although, notably, it failed to noticeably reduce the quantity of cocaine exports (International Crisis Group 2008: 1), while the Colombian military has come in for significant criticism regarding its human rights practices in putting it into effect (Isacson 2010: 5).

Whatever the successes are of Plan Colombia, they have not yet been replicated in Mexico. The drug-linked murder rate there has increased each year since 2006, despite the arrest of a respectable number of high-level drug traffickers and the deaths of various others, at the hands of both the state and their rivals. This undercuts the theory that "decapitating" the cartels by killing or arresting their leadership would be in and of itself sufficient to control the violence. Proponents of the decapitation strategy often base their argument upon the successful Colombian-American joint operations which brought down the Cali and Medellin cartels in Colombia (Bonner 2010: 43), but this ignores the fact that the hierarchical Cali and Medellin cartels represented an organizational anomaly amongst Colombian drug trafficking organizations (Kenney 2009). Additionally, the situations in Colombia in the late 1980s/early 1990s and today's Mexico are different in hugely substantial ways: the Colombian government faced an active and well-organized political insurgency in addition to drug traffickers, and Colombia is a production rather than transit site for drugs, which changes the dynamics of counter-narcotics operations considerably.

Moreover, in Mexico, the easy availability of high-powered weapons just across the border in the United States has meant that gunmen in the employ of DTOs can often win fights with the poorly-equipped

6 This agency has been subsequently reformed and renamed the Federal Preventative Police, but remains Mexico's premier paramilitary police force.

7 Unlike many of the other most-affected areas in the drug war, Michoacan is not desirable to traffickers for its proximity to the United States. Rather, it is a mountainous, rural area on the country's southern Pacific coast, which means that it is ideally situated for both drug production and as a quiet area in which nautical shipments of drugs from South American producers can be received.

8 While the appropriation for the Initiative was USD 1.4 billion, distribution of the funds since its signing has been slow: in July, 2010, the Government Accountability Office found that only 9% of the funds have actually been expended (GAO 2010).

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local and municipal police forces, and even stand up against assaults by the military. Internal politics in the United States make restricting gun sales difficult; and a recent attempt by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to track gun sales into Mexico ended in scandal when it was revealed that the ATF had knowingly allowed agents of DTOs to purchase hundreds of assault weapons and bring them south across the border, where they were used in various murders and attacks (Horwitz 2011).

As of this writing, there appears to be no end in sight to the conflict. There is no central figure in the Mexican drug trafficking community who can be killed, arrested, co-opted, or negotiated with—the most powerful trafficker in the country is probably Joaquim "El Chapo" ("Shorty") Guzman, head of the Sinaloa cartel, but given that even his cartel does not control a majority or plurality share of the drug trade (Bunker 2011: 11), it is extraordinarily unlikely that any feasible combination of arrests or killings could undo the rationale for violence and bring the violence down to its pre-2006 levels.

Constraints on Conflict in Mexico

There are two basic sets of constraints which control the shape and type of violence in Mexico. The first is the series of interlocking structures which compose the international narcotics market and the international narcotics prohibition system, and the second is Mexico's geography and geopolitical situation.

I will begin with the composition of the system by which narcotics are distributed and controlled. Unlike many other "conflict resources" (such as timber, diamonds or oil), drugs are universally prohibited—they cannot be laundered or otherwise moved into a legitimate market.[9] In other words, the means by which drugs are produced and brought to market are entirely outside the control of any kind of legitimate authority. As a result, in drug markets, the only means of contract enforcement is violence, either explicit or implicit (Reuter 2009: 75). This is not to say that all drug markets are inherently violent,[10] but compared to legitimate or even semi-legitimate markets, they operate under a different set of rules—and the behaviour of actors in those markets is correspondingly different.

The drug market is also predicated upon two other factors: a huge disparity between the price of production and what users will pay for those products, and a relatively constant level of demand. The price disparity has been increased by the globalisation of the drugs trade. With borders opened by free trade and a vast amount of goods moving relatively unsupervised between countries, it has become common for drug traffickers to site production in countries where labour costs are low and the local security services are poorly equipped, easily corruptible or otherwise incapable of exercising complete control over their territory, and then to sell the drugs for an exponentially higher price in rich countries where large-scale production would be unfeasible. Meanwhile, fifty years of complete global drug prohibition have not put a damper on demand. The reasons for this are complex, controversial and beyond the scope of this article. However, even contemporary US government sources suggest that 40 years since Richard Nixon declared that drug abuse would be defeated, the threat from drug trafficking is increasing rather than decreasing (US Department of Justice 2010). Admissions such as this, given the historical failures of similar initiatives such as Prohibition, demonstrate that while governments can influence the global illicit drug market on the margins, its existence and basic functions are beyond state control.

In short, any conflict in which drug trafficking play a role exists within a larger system which provides substantial resources to traffickers. These dynamics are particularly strong in Mexico, which also has specific geographical, political and economic factors that contribute to its vulnerability to persistent, drug-linked conflict. The geographical factors include its lengthy land border with the United States, its long coastlines (ideal for seaborne bulk shipments of narcotics to be delivered surreptitiously), its relative proximity to the world's leading cocaine producers (Colombia, Bolivia and Peru) and its sheer size. The political factors include an often-fractious system of government with substantial corruption problems (Lupsha 1991: 41-58) and a relationship with the United States freighted with historical grievances and mutual mistrust (Deare 2009), while the contributory economic issues include a large population with substantial levels of economic inequality and poverty, which means that drug trafficking organizations have a large number of potential recruits with few other profitable alternatives available to them. Even in the absence

9 This is largely a result of the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, although a variety of other international legal statutes apply as well. While a few countries (famously, the Netherlands, although to varying degrees in other places) have decriminalised drugs, their production, distribution and use are crimes virtually everywhere.

10 The production of marijuana in Northern California and British Columbia takes place with little to no violence, for example.

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of a political insurgency,[11] these factors have combined to create a "perfect storm" of drug violence.

Understanding Violent Markets: "A Thousand Little Wars"

As with the combination of factors which create a major storm, the state of violence which afflicts Mexico is complex and multifaceted. One of the most important aspects of this type of violence is its decentralisation. This is a critical concept for understanding the persistence of violence in Mexico, but it requires some explanation. It is closely related to the concept of networking, which, broadly speaking, holds that social, political and economic phenomena can be explained by mapping the relationships between individuals or groups (usually referred to as "nodes"). Network theory has been applied to a wide variety of subjects in both the natural and social sciences (Freeman 2004), but this article is concerned with its application to conflict. There have been various attempts to explain decentralisation and networking as organizational concepts for particular violent groups; perhaps most widely known amongst these is the concept of "Netwar" promulgated by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (2001). This theory holds that forces in opposition to the state, whether "dark" groups of terrorists, drug smugglers and revolutionaries or "light" groups of civil society activists, are evolving towards a networked form of organization, which Arquilla and Ronfeldt dub the "all-channel network", in which every node can connect with every other node to maximise information-sharing, responsiveness and resiliency. Netwar is a useful step away from thinking of drug gangs as simply dark mirror images of militaries or law enforcement agencies. It posits that gangs are structured in a variety of different ways. Organizational structures may range from hierarchical groups with clearly defined leadership positions and a straightforward chain of command to "hub" networks centred around those who have the most connections to other members of the network. In order to minimise the potential damage from infiltration by law enforcement, more sophisticated organizational structures often manifest themselves as "chain" networks in which each node (an individual or sub-group) only has contact with their neighbours.[12]

This typology explains how DTOs frequently survive beyond the capture or killing of their leading figures. In the last five years, the Mexican government has announced the arrests or killings of leadership figures from every major cartel operating in the country, with scant effect on the levels of violence or drug availability (Department of Justice 2010). There are a few examples of violent cartels which have been successfully decapitated; most frequently cited are the cases of the Cali and Medellin cartels of Colombia, which amassed enormous power and wealth in the 1980s and early 1990s, only to be brought down by a joint Colombian-American effort to eliminate their leaders, which most famously resulted in the killing of Pablo Escobar. Yet as Michael Kenney has ably demonstrated, this is not prima facie evidence that decapitation would work against any given DTO, for several reasons. First, the Cali and Medellin cartels were exceptional in their degree of centralisation and their willingness to challenge the central authority of the state (which included collaboration with political insurgents and assassinations of high-ranking government officials). Most DTOs in Colombia and elsewhere have assumed very different forms. Secondly, while the hierarchies of the two cartels were destroyed along with the infrastructure which supported that very high level of state challenge, the underlying drug trafficking network continued to exist (Kenney 2009: 99), and the total amount of cocaine being produced and exported did not noticeably change (International Crisis Group 2008). What had happened was that the circumstances made the large, hierarchical super-cartels obsolete, and they were replaced by (or to some degree, evolved into) smaller, more loosely organized drug trafficking groups. These groups are less able to directly challenge the state in the way that the super-cartels were, but they are still capable of significant levels of both violence and innovation—the proliferation of semi-submersible "narco-submarines" since 2005 serving as evidence of the latter (Bühler 2010).

Neither the typology of criminal network forms nor their general ability to withstand trauma which would be fatal to a hierarchy are sufficient to explain the persistence and scale of the violence in Mexico. Instead,

11 The one political insurgency of note in Mexico is the Zapatista movement, based in the Yucatan peninsula, which advocates against free trade, and for greater rights for labor unions and indigenous people. They fought a brief series of battles with the government in 1994, and have pursued their goals through largely peaceable means ever since. However, they have never been involved with drug trafficking.

12 I say this form is "specialised" because it is ideally suited to smuggling networks – each node represents one step of the journey (e.g.. those who produce the drug, those who process it, those who ship is across borders, and those who retail it to customers).

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what we have to understand is how these features, in the context of the constraints already discussed, support a market of violence. Netwar is a useful means of explaining how successful violent organizations can be arranged according to non-hierarchical patterns in order to maximise resiliency, but it assumes a common purpose amongst the "nodes". It is therefore limited in its application here to explaining the resilience of individual drug trafficking organizations to the coercive capability of the state. The resilience of violence between a large and apparently growing number of disparate organizations not having a common purpose (aside from the accumulation of profit) requires a more nuanced explanation.

David Keen describes intractable conflicts elsewhere as "complex emergencies", which instead of a battle to the end between opposed, vaguely symmetrical forces, can actually serve to enhance prospects for certain type of economic activity. The production and trafficking of drugs is a good example of this phenomenon, since a strong state will severely curtail profitable drug-trafficking activities (Keen 2008: 26). This is a useful way of thinking about conflicts such as Mexico. Unlike in an insurgency, the drug gangs there are not seeking the overthrow of the state or even the breakaway of a specific region, as in an insurgency. Insurgency is not an applicable model for understanding networked conflict, since it refers to a specific variant on war in which relatively clearly defined groups contest a specific political objective, albeit through asymmetrical means.

Herfried Münkler identifies symmetry as one of the defining characteristics which join conventional and unconventional warfare. By this, he does not mean symmetry between the means of the attackers, but between the ways they understand the conflict and its stakes—in other words, an asymmetry not only of means but of ends (Münkler 2005: 68). Drug violence is an excellent example of asymmetry between combatants. For the state, public health and order are at stake; whereas for drug traffickers, violence serves as their sole means of contract enforcement and, to some extent, the means by which they support their livelihoods. The asymmetries grow even further when drug trafficking conflicts are put in a transnational context. For the rich, stable countries which serve as the demand engine for drugs, the interest is at stake is public health and the enforcement of laws which serve to regulate individual behaviour, and to a small extent the maintenance of public order. For the countries which host the production and trafficking aspects of the drugs trade, the loss of income and violence are more existential threats, and public health and behavioural standards are subsequently deprioritised. As Nikos Passas points out, this tendency is exacerbated in countries undergoing substantial economic, social and political transitions—as in Mexico, with the combination of its new, NAFTA-based free trade relationship with the United States, and its political transition away from one-party rule by the PRI (Passas 2000). This is neatly exemplified by the contrast between drug and gun laws in the United States and Mexico. In the former, drug laws are stringent and strictly enforced while guns are widely and easily available, while in the latter, laws against drug possession are relatively mild whilst those against gun ownership are extremely strict. Münkler further observes that in asymmetrical conflicts, the distribution of costs is highly uneven: as the conventional tools of war have gotten exponentially more costly to purchase, maintain and use, the cost of waging unconventional war has stayed steady—or, in some cases, even declined (Münkler 2005: 92). This principle sees perhaps its clearest expression in drug violence, since drug traffickers make huge profits from their trade, while the state cannot legitimately claim any benefit against its huge and increasing expenditure fighting them.

Of course, the drugs trade is not the only driving force which can generate sustained violence in a country not suffering from a politically or ideologically-motivated insurgency. As Phil Williams notes, the current outbreak of violence in Mexico can be roughly compared to the "Wild East" of 1990s Russia—a sharp rise of organized criminality in the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s (Williams 2011: 223). In the post-Soviet Russia, as Vadim Volkov has demonstrated, the resources contested were not a particular product, but rather control over large sections of the newly-privatised state economy. This led Volkov to dub the particular breed of post-Soviet organised criminals "violent entrepreneurs", (Volkov 2002) which is an apt term for the combination of entrepreneurial attitude and willingness to use force. Understanding actors as having economic rather than political interests helps put violence that falls in between traditional conceptions of war and crime into a much more clear and comprehensive context. In a market without traditional enforcement or regulatory mechanisms, or any kind of recourse to a centralised authority, violence assumes a wide variety of purposes. It serves as a means of defending or expanding a group's spheres of influence, a medium of communication between groups that lack

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established contacts with each other,[13] or a way to demonstrate seriousness of purpose and commitment to a particular goal (or business, or region).

In this way we can see the outlines of a market of violence which is not dependent for its perpetuation upon the success or even the survival of a particular individual or group. With a powerful economic driver such as the market for narcotics or the sudden and wholesale privatisation of an entire national economy, and given some (not necessarily vast) degree of state weakness or dysfunction, a dynamic can emerge, in which the provision of violence can be bought, sold, or bartered like any other product. John Robb, referring to the proliferation of loosely-affiliated actors who composed the Iraqi insurgency, used the phrase a "bazaar of violence" (Robb 2007: 15). The conception of a "market of violence" as used here is similar, although in Robb's conception the provision of violence was simply the product being offered. In a market such as Mexico, absent the ideological and religious differences of Iraq, and without an occupying foreign force to provide an overarching political goal for violent actors, violence can certainly be a product, but it is also, critically, the means by which disputes are resolved and contracts are enforced. It is, in other words, a service as well as a product. It also serves a regulatory purpose: Within such a context, acts of violence which may appear to an outside observer to be random and meaningless are, in fact, the operating currency of the market, and serve to regulate its functions within the external constraints. As long as the level of violence does not breach those constraints,[14] the system will continue generating profits and violence apace with little regard for which individuals and groups are taking part.

The market of violence, in other words, is a flexible conception which explains the persistence of violence even as the number of actors and individual agendas increase rapidly. Instead of trying to fit a conflict with a multitude of individual participants who share no common agenda into a basically bilateral model such as war or organized crime, conceptualising Mexico as a market of violence explains the persistence of violence there, and furthermore, allows us to examine what changes might lead to its end.

Approaches to the Marketplace of Violence in Mexico

The self-reinforcing dynamics of the market of violence can clearly be seen at work in Mexico. Although the country is not in the first rank of narcotics producers worldwide, its border with the United States—the world's leading narcotics consumer—has become an incredibly valuable piece of real estate for drug traffickers. Furthermore, the regulations imposed by the NAFTA mean that crossing the border with cargo—legitimate or otherwise—is relatively easy; it is unfeasible for the US government to interrupt the economically vital border exchanges.[15] This economic engine is also powered by the massive wealth disparity between those who pursue legitimate occupations (which, near the border, are largely limited to jobs in the border factories, called maquiladoras, where wages total only a few dollars a day) and the comparatively vast riches awaiting those who enlist with a drug gang (Rice 2011). Put simply, the dynamics of the border economy help create the constraints under which a system of complex, persistent violence can come to pass.

Next, the conditions created by the Mexican government—including its fractious relationship with the US government—have also contributed to the violence. The breakdown of the traditional system of patronage between the Mexican state and the cartels which accompanied the transition from PRI to PAN rule around the turn of the century compelled DTOs to turn to more violent measures to secure market share. This process was accelerated when Felipe Calderón's administration sent the paramilitary federal police and the military itself after the cartels starting in 2006—with no serious remaining prospect of resuming the semi-collaborative relationship they enjoyed with the PRI government, the DTOs were left with little choice but to maximize their use of violence to protect their market share against the state.

Finally, the structure of the cartels themselves supports this type of conflict. With a large number of major car-

13 This is true in a particularly direct and brutal fashion in Mexico, where a variety of different DTOs have adopted "corpse messaging" (leaving dead bodies with warnings or messages written on them in public places) as a communications tool.

14 Williams (2010) compares violence in Mexico to the conflict between the Sicilian Mafia and the contemporary Italian state, and describes such an act of violence which breached one of the constraints: the 1992 assassination of popular anti-Mafia judge Giovanni Falcone, which mobilised public opinion against the Mafia and undercut their draw on the sympathy of the public.

15 To give a sense of the scale, the estimated value of legitimate cross border-trade in 2010 was USD 71 billion, just between the cities of Juarez and El Paso. See http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/magazine/life-on-the-line-between-el-paso-and-juarez.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all.

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tels and an even larger array of sub-units and smaller gangs, the Mexican state could not focus its attention on one particular gang or region without leaving the others relatively unmolested. Furthermore, as predicted by the proponents of the netwar theory, Mexican drug gangs have adapted a number of different organizational and operational characteristics. As examples, Los Zetas tend to much more mercenary and use fear as a population control technique (Campbell 2011), while La Familia Michoacana built up a social service network and alternative forms of governance in its home territory, becoming the closest thing the conflict has to a traditional insurgency (Finnegan 2010). This broad spectrum further complicates matters for the government, as a strategy likely to be effective against a group organized to maximise violence and intimidation is unlikely to work against one organized in such a way as to maintain support amongst the population. One size, in Mexico, will not fit all.

Given the organizational diversity of drug trafficking organizations and their substantial resources, the Mexican government cannot win the conflict by simply attacking them piecemeal and hoping the rate of attrition outstrips their rate of replacement, as it has been doing. The current approach can perhaps best be described as a conflict management strategy. The large and relatively competent Mexican military and security forces are perfectly capable of maintaining the state's monopoly on violence in most of the country and preventing the emergence of a super-cartel powerful enough to challenge its authority (which in any event would never be tolerated by the United States). However, until the constraints which have created this network of violence are fundamentally changed, there will continue to be a high level of bloodshed in areas along the border and major trafficking routes, with a substantial attendant cost in lives, treasure and credibility. In the abstract, there are four basic ways that this violent marketplace could be undermined.

First, the external constraints could be changed at a fundamental level. This would require one of two alternatives: the closing of the US-Mexican border and/or the repeal of NAFTA, or the legalisation of drugs. I group these two together because they are both equally unlikely to come to pass in the foreseeable future. The immediate economic damage from closing the border would be so severe as to effectively rule out the first option, never mind the extremely high direct costs of fortifying the border to the extent that it would no longer be economically feasible to transport drugs across it. Drug legalisation is often mentioned as a way to undercut the rationale for violence, but aside from the extreme difficulty in overturning a long-established and universal international norm, it is no panacea. Drug trafficking organizations are unlikely to simply allow legitimate businesses to supplant them, and in any case, the potential for conflict over a resource is not necessarily tied to its illegality (Andreas & Wallman 2009: 228). It may be that changing social norms will make legalisation increasingly likely at some point in the future, but for the moment, it seems to be a dim prospect.

Secondly, a deal could be struck with drug traffickers, similar to the one which existed under the PRI. The traffickers would be more or less left alone to sell drugs provided that they did so without engaging in violence. This is nearly as unlikely as the border-closing or legalisation scenarios, for a variety of reasons. First, Calderón's government cannot accept this state of affairs, as it would be an admission of failure in its signature security policy. And although Calderón himself is ineligible for re-election, it is unlikely that the machinery of the PAN would endorse a candidate who intended to reverse Calderón's signature national security policies. Alternately, if a different party (most likely the PRI) were to win, the United States would continue to put strong pressure on the Mexican government to avoid this approach. Finally, the drug traffickers themselves are unlikely to agree to such an arrangement – with no central authority amongst them, there is no one for the government to negotiate with, which means either the government would have to effectively ally itself with one group and help it destroy its competition (a morally suspect policy, and one which would be vehemently opposed by the United States), or get every major cartel to agree to a plan. Although it is possible that corruption in the Mexican security and justice systems could lead to some variant on this outcome, it is extremely difficult to imagine the country's leadership taking this path intentionally, and without the leadership's involvement it would be extremely difficult for a truce to become the standard nationwide.

Third, a change in the cultural context could undercut the rationale for drug-related violence. While in most regards the comparison between networked violence in Mexico to insurgency is invalid, neither occurs in a vacuum. Drug traffickers, particularly those groups such as the Zetas which have elected to pursue a maximally violent strategy of intimidation, may not require public support in the same fashion as a traditional insurgency, but they require a certain amount of public

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tolerance nonetheless, largely for a steady stream of recruits necessary for expansion and to compensate for attrition. There is the beginning of a popular anti-violence movement in Mexico right now (BBC News 2011), but given the relatively low amount of popular support DTOs need to maintain the capability to do violence, and the variety of ways this support can be coerced, a cultural shift against drug-trafficking would have to be either epochal or combined with changes in other constraints.

Finally, a massive program of institution-building could undercut the economic rationale for drug violence. This would entail raising the cost of drug trafficking through the creation of more effective security services backed up by a more effective justice system (at the moment, the conviction rate for drug murders in Mexico remains under 4%) (Manwaring 2009: 22), and simultaneously creating more feasible alternatives to drug trafficking for potential cartel recruits by means of massive economic investment. Although expensive, this is probably the most feasible of the available alternatives, and combined with a change in cultural attitudes, the most likely to bring about a real reduction in harm from the drug trade. While the Mérida Initiative is theoretically a step towards this strategy, accompanied by initiatives such as the Mexican government's "Todos Somos Juarez" ("We are all Juarez") civil-society programs, the lack of a clear strategy for institution-building on the part of either government demonstrates that this type of change will not occur overnight, either (GAO 2010: 18).

Conclusion

Markets of violence are incredibly resilient and difficult to break down. They cannot be negotiated with in a traditional fashion, nor can they be appeased or defeated through traditional military means. Since the profit motive remains, and the relatively short life expectancy of drug traffickers has not demonstrated a clear deterrent effect upon recruitment, simply increasing the number of traffickers captured or killed is unlikely to have anything more than a transient effect on violence, and in fact may lead to an increase, as formerly disciplined organizations break down amidst infighting and internal power struggles. Traditional anti-crime strategies are reliant upon this deterrent effect, while counterinsurgency strategies rely upon maintaining control of the "social terrain" of the population, which, even ignoring the significant human rights concerns of using the military as a domestic peacekeeping agency, is virtually impossible without providing economic alternatives sufficient to change the economic calculations of potential drug traffickers.

In other words, the conceptions used by American and Mexican policymakers to understand and respond to drug violence in Mexico are unnecessarily complicating and frustrating the task of implementing policies which take account of the structural differences between crime, war and markets of violence. By superimposing binary models onto a multifaceted conflict, it is likely that they are simply extending a bloody status quo.

Notes on Contributor

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